

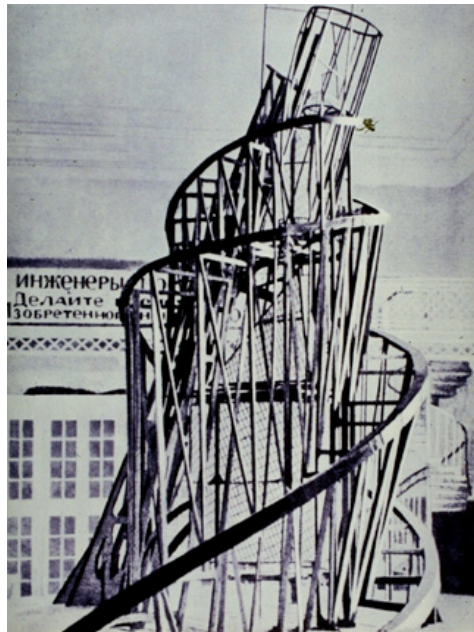
BUILDING A UNIVERSE
CONSTRUCTION SERIES

MFA THESIS

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In his famous essay “On the Spiritual in Art,” Wassily Kandinsky, described art as a portrayal of spiritual values. He stated “All art builds from the spiritual and intellectual life. While each art form appears to be different externally, their internal properties serve the same inner purpose, of moving and refining the human soul.” [1] This belief in creating a dialogue between life and art that Kandinsky referred to is something I believe as well. The sculptures in this body of work *Construction Series*, re visualizations of this life-affirming philosophy.

In the work, “*Model for the 3rd International Tower*,” (Figure 1), the artist Vladimir Tatlin provided an image “ of the social macrocosm, of collective man”[2]. Tatlin’s “*Tower*” (Figure 1) was a model of a mechanical cosmic universe designed with levels of interlocking meeting and office spaces. The main cylinder was a twin helix that spiraled up 1312.34 feet. The bottom section represented the earth and was designed for meetings, lectures and conferences. The middle section was to be used for strategy meetings and administrative activities and the top was designated information operations. “Tatlin’s Tower was made from orbits of stars and planets; the turning of seasons; the constant processes of formation and re-formation of the earth itself; the constant struggles and transformations of human history; all forces in motion toward their natural and historical fulfillment.”[3]

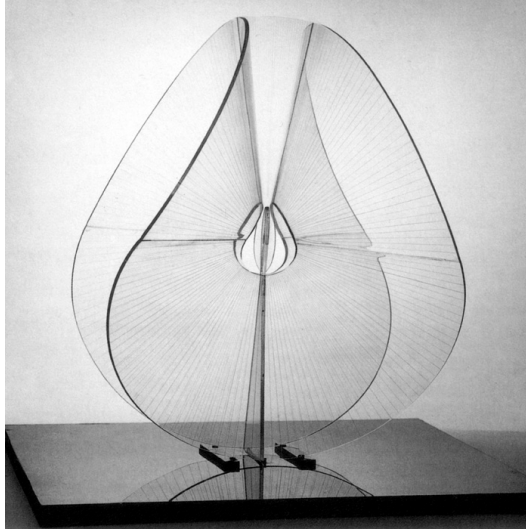


(Figure 1) “*Model for the 3rd International Tower*” 1919-1920
(Never built) by Vladimir Tatlin)

The “*Model for the 3rd International Tower*,” looks like a mechanical contraption. The spiraling appearance suggests rotation. The top resembles a widow’s walk, rooftop platform. The spiraling “*Tower*,” appears to tilt as if it’s being pushed. The “*Tower*,” gets progressively narrower at the top. In researching Tatlin, I learned that his vision for the “*Tower*,” was to bring attention to the social nature of mankind. He had a utopian idea to build a monument to modernity that would dwarf the Eiffel Tower in Paris. It was never built because the structure needed massive amounts of steel and the technology it required had yet to be invented. “Tatlin’s Tower was viewed as a symbol to celebrate a new world. “It was a utopian dream, an impractical monument to practicality.”[4]

In 1937 Russian constructivist artist, Naum Gabo created the sculpture, “*Translucent Variation on Spherical Theme*.” In this work, Gabo was pushing the traditional boundaries of sculptural form by using non-traditional materials such as plastic, wire and thread. His work defined volume by weaving semi transparent materials along curved structures. Naum Gabo and his brother Antoine Pevsner, leaders of the Constructivist Movement wrote the “Realistic Manifesto.” Their purpose in writing this document was to challenge traditions of art by separating conventions of color, line volume and mass. “Constructivism refers to non-representational relief construction, sculpture, kinetics and painting. These artists were using non-traditional methods of constructing sculpture other than carving and modeling.” [5] In 1912 the futurist sculptor Umberto Boccioni wrote that “modern sculpture, must transcend statuary whose mass was arranged about a central axis. Sculpture must be the art of transposing into material forms the spatial planes that enclose and traverse an object. For the first time in the history of sculpture, the artist created three-dimensional objects whose purpose was not to emphasize their solidity and density, but rather the tension generated by the unseen geometry at the border of space and mass.” [6]

The Constructivist tradition speaks to me on many levels. One is the practice they established of using non-traditional materials. I create sculpture with fiberglass rods, a linear material used for industrial purposes. The Constructivist artists are responsible for challenging and helping to re-define principles of volume without mass.



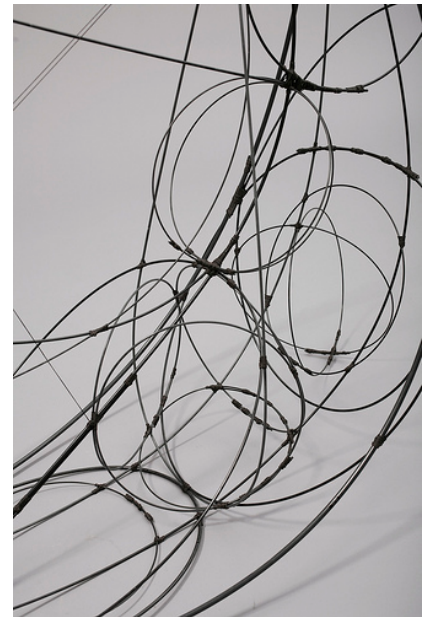
(Figure 2) Naum Gabo, “*Translucent Variation on Spherical Theme*,”1937

Gabo’s “*Translucent Variation on Spherical Theme*,”(Figure 2) was created from this principle using fine wire and plastics. In my work I practice the Constructivist tradition of volume without mass. Space and light usage took on new meaning from my research on Constructivism. I relate very much to the beauty of the curved forms and delicate array of symmetrical lines of “*Translucent Variation on Spherical Theme*.” Researching, Gabo’s work inspired me to push the application of light and shadows in my work’s display space. This helped the work by adding dimension and texture. I also learned to engage more interactively with the ambient space.

In *Construction series*, I created sculptures that are intuitive and reflective visualizations of life’s paths: birth, adolescence, adulthood and death. This body of work represents stages of life structured by personal statements. My sculptures are constructed forms made of circular paths that visually represent life in the twenty-first century. Many people juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. All individuals fall into communities, without this structure our lives would be very difficult. My work is a visual interpretation of intersecting universes in which I attempt to keep worlds from colliding.

There is a level of satisfaction from learning to navigate multiple universes. Like a musical instrument uses pitch to control the right key, I use circles and curved lines to define my vision of a beautiful shape. It is the backbone of the construction and the strongest physical element of the sculpture. I believe that life is fluid; my work reflects this philosophy by using curvilinear spherical shapes. In *Construction Series*, I portray stages of life that fall in two distinct categories, the geometrically ordered and the unruly.

Time spent on work and family commitments can involve stress as well as generate beautiful outcomes. This is a gamble each person makes when he or she straddles multiple worlds. In my work, I can add or subtract value in endless ways. In this current body of work I choose to place value on time spent in creating the completed spherical universes. In this association, I have made judgments about the more complex constructions in the sculpture. I am comparing value in my work in terms of time and complexity with value judgments that relate to the balancing act of my daily life.

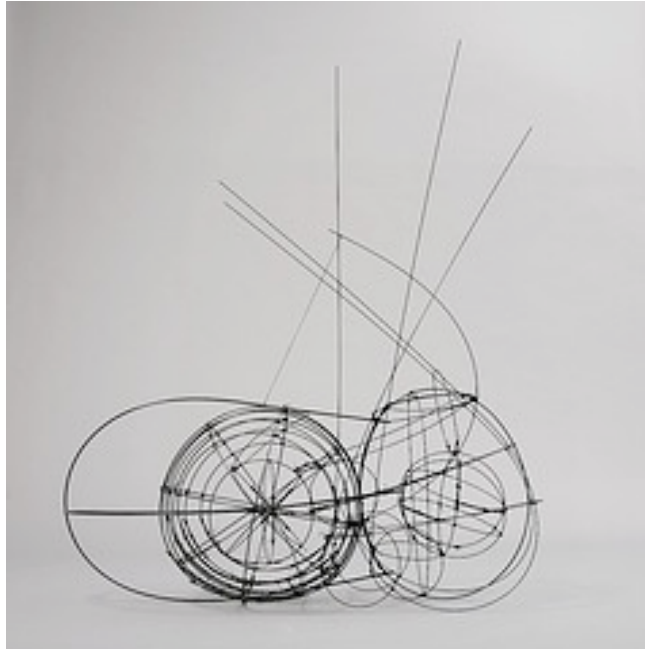


(Figures 3 & 4) “*Construction #I*” and detail by Susan Tennant, 2010

The sculpture “*Construction #I*” (Figures 3&4) draws visually from time spent rocking a child or elderly parent to sleep. This constructed form resembles a rocking chair. Traditionally the rocking chair is used in the early and later stages of life. In “*Construction #I*” the flowing curves and circular patterns represent the stages of childhood and elderly care. The lines are open, comforting and more freely constructed. This is indicative of behavior at these times of life. The twine wrapped around the sculpture serves to hold the physical shape intact.

I often bind the ends of the fiberglass rods in different ways to give my work a degree of psychological edginess. This is representational of different states of mind and different stages of life. In the sculpture, “*Construction #II*,” (Figure 5) the cord is intentionally left with knots and loosely threaded ends to express anxiety, stress and nervous tension associated with

adolescence. The unfinished treatment of the twine is intentional; it resembles barbwire.

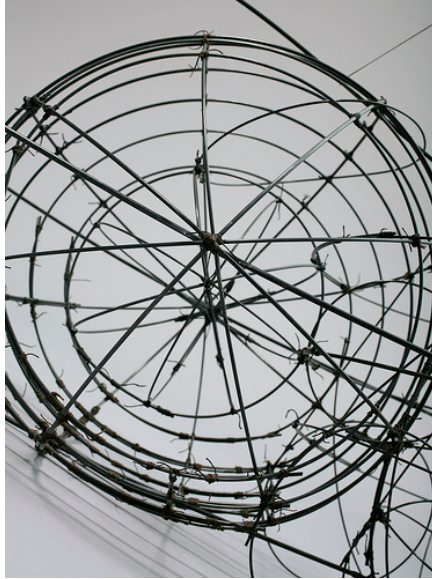


(Figure 5) “*Construction #II*” by Susan Tennant, 2010

The organization of form in this sculpture is reflective of tumultuous times. There is balance and control, trust and independence simple to complex. The inner sphere has layers of concentric circles that add volume to the form. On either side of this element are looser parts. “*Construction #II* expresses many emotional states attributed to raising a child through adolescence and waiting for he or she to mature.

*“The world is all gates, all opportunities,
strings of tension waiting to be struck”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson [7]



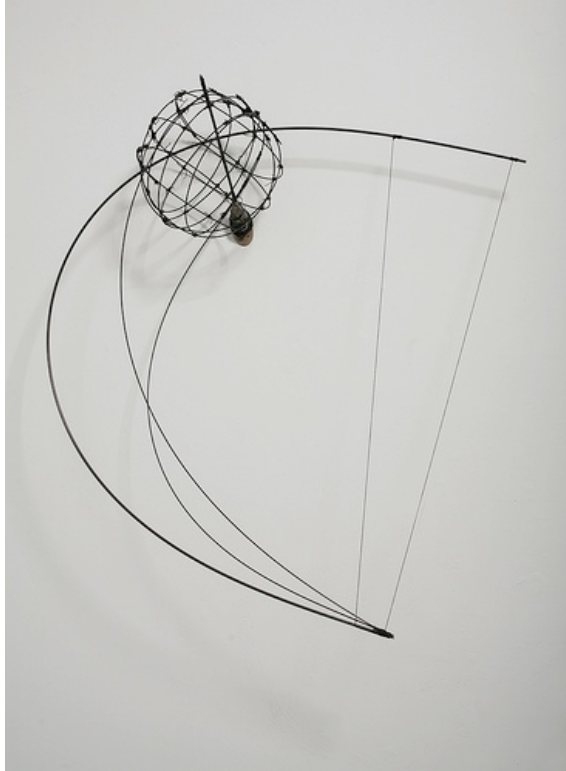
(Figure 6) Detail “*Construction #II*” by Susan Tennant, 2010

“*Construction #III*” (Figure 7) represent two different life stages. One part of the sculpture is attached to the wall and extends out onto the floor - as in a state of ascension. The other part of this sculpture appears to push off from the wall, ready to sail away. I want the viewer to see the physical and emotional connection between these forms. I consider them as two divergent (generational) paths. “*Construction #III*,” represents the life path of a child ready to let go and begin to test the waters of independence. It implies the movement from one phase of life into another. . In the wall related portion of “*Construction #III*,” the sphere hovers above the child. It also represents life’s aging path. There is a peaceful quality to this sculpture. I invite the viewer to listen in on the conversation between these two different forms



(Figure 7) "*Construction #III*" by Susan Tennant, 2010

Viewers might interpret my work in different ways. One may see the linear quality of my sculpture interlacing like celestial paths.



(Figure 8) “*Construction #III*” by Susan Tennant, 2010

It is often difficult to keep order when pressure of performance at work is aligned with weighty family responsibilities. This sense of conflict and suspense is similar to the intellectual and emotional process that I must struggle with to create my art. Through the process of making art, I am cognizant of the difficulties of manipulating materials to achieve desired forms. The tautness of the forces that I subject twine and rods to must be carefully balanced to create a structure that is at rest, but charged with internal energies. These characteristics mirror qualities of personal life and inform the creation of my work.

In my sculptures I portray the emotions of stress and tension by the tautness of the twine. The emotional tension is represented by the number of layers of rod and twine in the constructions. The tension of the form represents physical and psychological control.



(Figure 9) Detail of “*Construction #I*” by Susan Tennant, 2010

My work uses tension to express these pressures, stresses and anxious behaviors. The tension exhibited in “*Construction#*” I (Figure 9) is heightened by the reliance of a few key strands of twine and the idea of instability and the collapse that would occur if they were cut or were to fail. It is applied for constructive purposes to keep the curves stable and for psychological implications to emphasize life’s pressure.

I want the viewer to see the sculptures in *Construction Series*, from all perspectives and to understand that there is no one beginning point or end point. I create no direct orientation of front or back. The linear quality of my work makes it possible to view it from the outside, inside, top to bottom and side to side. I want the viewer to see the work and the space it occupies as one.

In his work Kenneth Snelson, uses tension to create sculpture that plays upon the landscape. He pursued his interest of material relationships through the principle of “tensegrity,” a hybrid of the terms tension and integrity. I am drawn to Snelson’s ability to make his work appear to spring from the ground and float in the air at the same time. This is how I would like the viewer to respond to “*Construction #VI*” (Figure 11). This sculpture connects the floor and wall. I want the viewer to move through my exhibition space and visually feel the energy.



(Figure 10) “*Free Ride Home*” Kenneth Snelson, 1974

Snelson's sculpture, "*Free Ride*" (Figure 10) is an example of playful inert energy. Snelson's work appears visually charged as the viewer moves under and around the form. It seems to float above and never touch the ground.

In *Construction Series*, I am expressing the stages of life and personal relationships through my work. I want the viewer to see these sculptures as representations of life's paths and decision and how they connect my worlds physically and emotionally. In "*Construction #IV*," (Figure 11), the curved lines weave the construction into and out of the wall space. The spheres tethered to the wall and floor at each end of the sculpture represent the beginning and final stages of life. This sculpture is a visualization of the connection between life and death, between the physical and spiritual.



(Figure 11) "*Construction #VI*" by Susan Tennant, 2010

I have found connections with many artists who share my belief that the practice of art extends beyond a physical/material state and references life-affirming attitudes. The constructivist artists believed that art was a positive expression of energy. I have learned that art is more than materials. For me, art serves to keep my different worlds balanced and to bring aesthetic, social and humanistic qualities into my life.

References

- [1] http://tars.rollins.edu/Foreign_Lang/Russian/kandin.html
- [2] John Milner, Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant -garde
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- [3] <http://counterlightsrantsandblather1.blogspot.com/2009/08/russian-avant-garde-part-2.html>
- [4] <http://www.huntfor.com/arthistory/C20th/constructivism.html>
- [5] Constructivism, Origins and Evolution, George Rickey, George Braxiller, New York
- [6] Art and Physics, Leonard Shlain, Publisher Morrow, 1991
- [7] Letters and Social Aims by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Macmillan and Co. London,
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Photo credits:

- Figure 1: <http://www.auburn.edu/~mitrege/russian/art/tatlin-tower.html>
- Figure 2: Tate Museum, <http://www.tate.org.uk/>
- Figure 3: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 4: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 5: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 6: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 7: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 8: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 9: Michelle Pemberton
- Figure 10 Susan Tennant, Storm King Sculpture Park. Mountainville, N.Y
- Figure 11 Michelle Pemberton